

## Organizing a Walk to School Day

This is for “first time organizers.”

Why: have a Walk to School Day? It is a simple event that can galvanize a community to encourage walking/bicycling to school, and making sure children are safe doing so.

When: have a Walk to School Day? The first Wednesday in October is International Walk to School Day, and the first Wednesday in May is another recognized date.

How: to have a Walk to School Day? This is the longer answer! It can be simple or elaborate. The good news is that there are endless Internet resources to help you organize – but that’s the bad news too, as they can make it look dauntingly complicated.

If we start with the goals it will make it easier to know where to begin organizing.

Goal 1: Inspire students, their parents, teachers and principals to encourage walking/bicycling to school.

Goal 2: Educate elected officials and decision-makers on the importance of walking/bicycling to school and inspire them to provide the needed facilities.

Walk to School Day is essentially children gathering into "walking groups" and walking together to school with adult supervision.

In organizing a first-time event, it is important to bite off only as much as you can comfortably chew. That may mean starting with one school and focusing on Goal 1.

I started with the principal of a neighborhood elementary school. We selected the date, she made sure that students learned about the event in their classes, and sent information home with the students for their parents about when and where walking groups would meet. At a PTA meeting, parents helped select locations for walking groups, and volunteered to lead them. It helps to have a map for this process. You can stop with this level of detail and have a successful, fun event.

### Potential Embellishments

- A first embellishment can be providing signs for the kids to carry in their groups. I secured donated poster board and 1x2s for sticks. The kids colored them in their

classrooms earlier in the week, and really enjoyed carrying them. “It’s Cool to Walk to School” was one theme. One parent stored the sticks for following events.

- Walk to School Day is a great opportunity to teach safe walking skills to students. Many police departments have a school liaison officer. When possible, the principal can arrange an assembly in which that officer can teach children how to walk safely. Ideally, of course, this happens shortly before Walk to School Day.
- If you want to insert goal 2 into the event, it can be as simple as inviting elected officials and other decision-makers to walk with the walking groups. We have done this by having sixth graders send invitations to our targeted invitees. We produced the invitations by using a drawing colored by students. I scanned this drawing, and turned it into the cover of an invitation. I then generated a list of names and addresses of city councilors, county commissioners, police chiefs, public works and planning directors, newspaper publishers, the school superintendent, and school board members. This list and the invitations were delivered to the principal, who apportioned them among classrooms. Children addressed the envelopes, and added a personal note in the invitations. The invitees were asked to RSVP to me, “our volunteer Molly.” The response was overwhelmingly positive, and I assigned our guests to walking groups. The PTA volunteer made sure that parents leading each walking group's knew which VIP invitees to expect.
- Publicity. Seeing your event in a local newspaper or hearing about it on a local radio station does wonders. Kids in walking groups are very photogenic, and almost sure to produce a front-page picture if the newspaper knows about the event. A simple press release will accomplish that, and you can download templates for them from Walk to School web sites.
- I had a more ambitious goal, which of course is optional. I wanted our event publicized in advance. The invitation sent to elected officials told them that their names would be sent to the newspaper, if they chose to participate. I met with the publisher and a reporter about a month before Walk to School Day, and we agreed that the day before the event a story would appear listing the walking groups, the parents leading them and the VIPs expected at each. This reminded everyone to show up. Providing the needed information to the press in plenty of time is key, as is nagging them to remember their commitments.

- Treats and Giveaways. With this embellishment you enter the world of fund-raising. It is really neat to have juice boxes for kids when they arrived at school. It is also exciting to give them reflective tags to clip to jackets and backpacks. Both cost money, although not huge amounts. Each organizer will figure out this fundraising step on his/her own. I approached the local Rotary Club, and they were enthused about getting involved. Their members worked great sources of money for tags, and juice boxes. Rotary volunteers help distribute these items to children arriving at school.

Remember, it is more important to have an event than to be scared off by contemplating one with all embellishments. As you surf the Web, having searched for "Walk to School" you will find many wonderful ways to add to Walk to School Day. That will keep this event fun for you and your fellow organizers for many seasons and help you make positive changes for students and your community. Have fun!